

DARK CLOUDS

Development plans alarm Muskoka residents



Anyone who has ever built a deck or a cottage or a boathouse knows there are a myriad of rules: setbacks, lot coverage, building height and more are all rigidly enforced.

For the past year, a group of residents has been campaigning to ensure that the rules are applied fairly and to everyone. “Whether you’re building a cottage, a boathouse or a resort, there are rules that spell out where and what you can build,” says Paul Richards, Vice-President of Friends of Muskoka.

“The rules are different, depending on what you’re building. But they’re based

on years of research, and they’re there to help preserve Muskoka.”

Friends of Muskoka was founded out of concern that some developers and planners of commercial properties were stretching the rules past the breaking point... and clearing the way for dozens of others to do the same.

The heart of the issue is whether someone can build a multi-residential property on a site zoned for a resort. “Resorts are intended to be used by the travelling public,” explains Laurie Thomson, President of the group. “They’re used in a very different way than a cottage.”

Because of that different usage, resorts have different rules, including permission to build at much higher densities than cottages.

However, a proposed change to the District’s Official Plan would let resorts sell up to half of their units as residences. The other half of the units are supposed to be available for rent, but Paul says there’s little likelihood of that being enforced. “In effect, this would allow a developer to build a subdivision on the lake and skirt a lot of zoning requirements by calling it a resort,” he says.

Construction is already underway on several projects, including one that’s slated to have 42 cottages and 50 boat slips on a site with less than 500 feet of water frontage, or a site that would normally accommodate 2 cottages.

Similar developments are being challenged at the Ontario Municipal Board by the Friends of Muskoka, which now has 4,000 people on their mailing list. The group is also working to prevent changes to Muskoka’s Official Plan that would allow this kind of development to proliferate. Over 25,000 people have signed their petition against residential development on commercial properties, and they are asking other residents to join them in lobbying local politicians.

“There are around 100 commercially-zoned properties on Muskoka lakes,” says Laurie. “If these first few go ahead, then we could see this scale of development everywhere. That would have an incredible impact on water quality, boat traffic, roads... everything.” And, she adds, “if any of these projects fail, it will be left to local ratepayers to clean up the mess as the developer by then will have collected his money and be long gone.”

“This isn’t about being anti-development, or saying Not In My Backyard,” adds Paul. “Develop the property if you wish, but do it according to the rules.”

“This matters to all of us”, he adds. “It would destroy the environment and natural character of Muskoka.” **DS**

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Friends of Muskoka
Protecting our lakes from harm.

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